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Theory

Amateur mythographies: Fan fiction and the myth of myth

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This paper draws on classical scholarship on myth in order to critically examine three ways in which scholars and fans have articulated a relationship between fan fiction and myth. These are (1) the notion of fan fiction as a form of folk culture, reclaiming popular story from corporate ownership; (2) the notion of myth as counterhegemonic, often feminist, discourse; (3) the notion of myth as a commons of story and a universal story world. I argue that the first notion depends on an implicit primitivizing of fan fiction and myth, which draws ultimately on the work of Gottfried von Herder in the 18th century and limits our ability to produce historically and politically nuanced understandings of fan fiction. The second notion, which is visible in the work of Henry Jenkins and Constance Penley, is more helpful because of its attention to the politics of narration. However, it is the third model of myth, as a universal story world, where we find the richest crossover between fan fiction's creative power and contemporary classical scholarship on myth, especially in relation to Sarah Iles Johnston's analysis of hyperserial narrative. I demonstrate this through some close readings of fan fiction from the Greek and Roman Mythology fandom on Archive of Our Own. I conclude the paper by extending Johnston's arguments to show that fan-fictional hyperseriality, specifically, can be seen as mythic because it intervenes not only in the narrative worlds of its source materials but also in the social world of its telling.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Joseph Campbell; Hyperseriality; Narrative

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1. Introduction

[1.1] The term *myth* recurs across multiple scholarly and popular contexts. It is slippery in its definition, as Csapo's tripartite schema suggests: is it to be defined according to its content ("traditional tales"), its context ("a narrative which is considered socially important"), or its function ("transmitting something of collective importance")? (Csapo 2005, 9). It is manifold in its referents: the word *myth* might be used to refer to ancient Greek and Norse stories about gods, heroes, and monsters; to margarine advertisements, Romans in films, or Greta Garbo's face (Barthes 1972); or, of course, to fan fiction. In this paper, I will draw on approaches to myth from both scholarly and amateur contexts in order to investigate the usefulness of the term *myth*, and the limits of its usefulness, for our understanding of fan fiction as narrative form and as social practice.

[1.2] The concept of myth has been important to the practice and analysis of fan work, including fan fiction, on three levels: content, form, and theory. On the level of content, various traditional tales—including classical and Norse mythologies—have provided characters, narratives, monsters, and story worlds for fans to use in the generation of new fictions, as attested by

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the 1,520 stories in the Greek and Roman Mythology fandom on Archive of Our Own (AO3) and the 3,200 stories labeled Greek Mythology on FanFiction.net (as at November 7, 2015). Classical myth thus forms part of the rich and diverse content of fan fiction and its multiple, crisscrossing story worlds. More importantly, however, the idea of myth has been used by both scholars and fans to generate, structure, and analyze fan fiction on a formal and a theoretical level. As a narrative form, fan fiction, like classical myth, is characterized by its multiple, self-contained but (at least potentially) overlapping or crisscrossing story worlds; as a social practice, it has been theorized as a counterhegemonic or resistant practice of mythopoesis.

[1.3] However, although "the theme of the fan community creating a popular myth has been a central facet of fan studies," as Hellekson and Busse put it (2014, 21), echoing the subtitle of Camille Bacon-Smith's foundational *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992), the idea of contemporary popular culture as myth has found little traction among classical myth scholars. Some classical scholars using a content-based definition of myth study contemporary popular forms which transmit or deliver ancient myth (for example, Kovacs 2011, 11: "the masses have always been consumers of myth, though the mode of delivery changes frequently"). This approach, however, tends to lead to readings of contemporary popular texts which are entirely centered on and circumscribed by questions about the accuracy with which such texts transmit their ancient mythic content. Thus, for example, Amanda Potter's essay on the Furies in *Xena* (1995–2001) and *Charmed* (1998–2006) worries that "viewers who had only the episodes on which to base their readings of the Furies could come away confused about the myth" (2009, 233–34); Ghita and Andrikopoulos, writing on the videogame *Rome: Total War* (2004), wonder whether they should "condemn the product for propagating inaccuracies and creating false beliefs about the ancient world, or praise it for reviving the interest of the public in antiquity, by whatever means" (2009, 119). Either way, the contemporary text is seen only as a transmission or mediation of past content, not—as fan studies would usually have it—as a present-day contribution to the still-living tradition of myth.

[1.4] Classical scholars who define myth not simply in terms of content but in terms of context or function are also disinclined to make connections between ancient and contemporary myth. Instead, they are concerned to emphasize the particularity of classical myth, and—particularly since the 1980s/1990s—have understood myth as being necessarily and irreducibly embedded in its social, historical, and cultural context. In his 1994 book *Imaginary Greece: The Contexts of Greek Mythology*, Richard Buxton defines myths as stories that are "socially embedded" in contrast to "idiosyncratic narratives" constructed by particular authors for particular ends (1994, 17). Citing Claude Calame's highly influential 1988 book *Métamorphoses du mythe en Grèce antique*, Buxton argues that if the terms *myth* and *mythology* "are so used as to elide cultural differences in the context and content of story-telling, then they are doing more harm than good" (1994, 13).

[1.5] Yet fans and pop culture audiences more often than not use these terms precisely to "elide cultural differences," to make connections between stories from widely different historical and cultural contexts. At the very same moment that classical scholars were turning away from comparativist decontextualizing models of myth toward an understanding of myth as "socially embedded," a strongly universalizing reading of Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) was infusing through popular storytelling, viewing, and critical practices, via George Lucas and Christopher Vogler (a story consultant at Disney who circulated a memo on the Hero's Journey in 1985, expanded into *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* in 1992) (note 1). This model of myth sees it as an underlying universal pattern for storytelling which can be found—in the

words of Vogler's memo—in "every story ever told" since "in his study of world hero myths Campbell discovered that they are all basically the same story," one that "springs from a universal source in the collective unconscious" (n.d.). This model has been influential on fans and remains important to at least some scholarly work on fan fiction: for example, Natalie Montano cites Campbell as "one of the foremost scholars on myth" (2013, 695) in a paper on fan fiction and intellectual property law to which I will return below.

[1.6] Classicists who follow Calame and Buxton in rejecting Campbell's model and moving to a definition of myth as socially embedded story have tended simply to dismiss popular cultural forms and practices which draw on this model, seeing them as fundamentally theoretically flawed and thus unworthy of scholarly analysis. However, instead of seeing these uses of myth in contemporary popular culture as irrelevant and/or incompetent contributions to scholarly discourse on myth, it might be more productive to see the interaction between fan fiction and classical myth as a site of intersection, negotiation, and contestation between different ways of doing myth. Indeed, as Bruce Lincoln points out in his book *Theorizing Myth*, the domain of myth has always been a site of exchange between amateur and scholarly knowledges: in the 19th century in particular, discourse on myth "moved freely across academic and popular settings" (1999, 74). Moreover, Lincoln argues that discourse on myth is itself a form of mythmaking in that it tells "a story with an ideological dimension" (216) about the past in order to situate us in the present. Thus the methodologies of the myth scholar should also be used to uncover and analyze the mythmaking aspects of discourses on myth, both popular and scholarly.

[1.7] In this paper I will take up Lincoln's suggestions to explore the notion of fan fiction as contemporary amateur mythography (note 2). I will focus on three interrelated myths of myth: the myth that myth is a form of folk culture owned by the people; the myth of myth as counterhegemonic discourse; and the myth of myth as a commons of story or a universal story world.

2. The myth of myth as folk culture

[2.1] The term *myth* is persistently used in fannish and scholarly contexts to argue for common or popular ownership of stories, often explicitly or implicitly invoking parallels with ancient myth. Will Brooker addresses this point explicitly in his book on Batman, *Hunting the Dark Knight*, in which he distinguishes three modes of continuity in the Batman universe, three "senses of Batman": myth, brand, and canon. He writes: "We could call the first sense of Batman the *myth*. 'Metatext' would also serve—in Reynolds's words, 'a summation of all the existing texts plus all the gaps that those texts have left unspecified'—but 'myth' captures better the sense that this Batman belongs to everyone; to the public, to popular memory, to a modern folk culture" (2012, 152).

[2.2] As Brooker's discussion makes clear, the use of the term *myth* here specifically invokes a folkloric model linked to a particular understanding of intellectual and cultural property: "Batman belongs to everyone" because he is part of "a modern folk culture." The same argument about myth as a mode of folklore and therefore as a mode of ownership is made, repeatedly and with particular intensity, about George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). One fan, Mark Magee, whose arguments have been given quasi-canonical status in academic fan studies by being cited in Henry Jenkins's book *Convergence Culture*, writes:

[2.3] If you were a kid in the seventies, you probably fought in schoolyards over who would play Han, lost a Wookie action figure in your backyard and dreamed of firing that last shot on the Death

Star. And probably your daydreams and conversations weren't about William Wallace, Robin Hood and Odysseus, but, instead, light saber battles, frozen men and forgotten fathers. In other words, we talked about our legend. (quoted in Jenkins 2006, 150)

[2.4] One of the key functions of the appeal to myth (or legend) here is to refuse or deny one of the most obvious differences between ancient myth and contemporary mass culture: the economic conditions of its production and circulation. Unlike Robin Hood and Odysseus, Han Solo is trademarked; his name and likeness are the intellectual property of Lucasfilm. Through childhood play, parody, conversational references, and transformative fan works, Han circulates in contexts far beyond the original three films in which he appears—even far beyond the officially licensed novels, films, comics, video games, and merchandise—but he is not available for any playwright or vase painter to use at will for commercial gain.

[2.5] Such appeals to myth that frame contemporary popular culture as folk culture thus construct a historical continuity and/or a conceptual parallel between, on the one hand, texts produced and circulated by the modern culture industry and, on the other hand, premodern folk culture. These appeals thus position themselves on one side of a major and ongoing debate in the study of popular culture: whether there is such a thing as a modern folk culture in a corporate cultural/media landscape and, if so, what such a thing might be. The debate goes back to the 1930s, when the Marxist cultural critic Theodor Adorno coined the term *mass culture*, referring to cultural products which are "mass-produced for mass consumption" (Storey 2012, 8); the culture industry (another phrase coined by Adorno) is thus just another manufacturing industry using mass-production techniques to turn out standardized products designed to maximize profit for producers and advertisers. Mass culture, according to Adorno's analysis, promotes passive listening practices and is the polar opposite of popular culture in the sense of an authentic folk culture, "the culture that originates from 'the people'" (Storey 2012, 9). Instead, mass culture is a mechanism of cultural control, a key part of the workings of capitalist hegemony.

[2.6] However, a strong distinction between mass and popular culture no longer seems tenable to most media scholars and cultural critics, especially since studies of fan production have shown how intertwined certain popular forms are with mass culture. Henry Jenkins writes, "The story of American arts in the twentieth century might be told in terms of the displacement of folk culture by mass media...Increasingly, the commercial cultures generated the stories, images, and sounds that mattered most to the public" (2006, 139). "Having buried the old folk culture," he goes on to argue, "this commercial culture becomes the common culture" (2006, 141). And fan fiction, as he has argued elsewhere, explicitly linking the debate to questions of ownership, "is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk" (quoted in Harmon 1997).

[2.7] Describing the texts of popular culture as myths is, then, a way of claiming commercial culture as common culture and ultimately as the basis for a genuine popular or folk culture—fan culture—that exists outside capitalist networks of production, distribution, and consumption (or at least in a tense or resistant relationship to those networks). Another *Star Wars* fan, Elizabeth Durack, also cited by Jenkins, takes this argument to its logical conclusion and claims that *Star Wars* belongs—morally, at least—to its fans:

[2.8] Perhaps the fans have a moral right to use *Star Wars*-related names and creative concepts at will because *Star Wars* is such a deeply ingrained part of our culture. The very success and ubiquity of the franchise is what makes it hover (dangerously?) close to the border of being something no longer

privately-owned, but public cultural property. It has been observed by many writers that *Star Wars* (based purposely on the recurring themes of mythology by creator George Lucas) and other popular media creations take the place in modern America that culture myths like those of the Greeks or Native Americans did for earlier peoples. Holding modern myths hostage by way of corporate legal wrangling seems somehow contrary to nature. (Durack 2000)

[2.9] Durack's argument here is cited by Henry Jenkins as evidence that "the fans wanted to hold on to their right to participate in the production and circulation of the *Star Wars* saga which had become so much a part of their lives" (2006, 153) and ultimately as part of his argument that fan fiction and fan creativity in general is an example of modern folk culture. The same move—the appeal to myth to argue for the rights of fans to own popular cultural properties—is made more recently in a scholarly context by Natalie Montano, who writes that "the public should have access to stories, characters, and other aspects of original works in order to perpetuate myth" (2013, 695).

[2.10] I want to attend carefully to the specific terms in which Durack frames her thinking, however, not because I see Durack's argument as intended to stand up to extensive scholarly scrutiny, but because precisely in its ephemerality, its everydayness, and its appeal to common sense and consensus, it reveals a fundamental and productive contradiction underlying many fannish and scholarly appeals to myth.

[2.11] Durack suggests that *Star Wars* belongs to its fans because its place in the settler society of the modern United States is analogous to the place and function of myth in Ancient Greek and Native American societies: *Star Wars* as myth therefore has an organic and authentic cultural significance that means that it cannot be owned by corporations. This claim rests on the idea that myth works in the same way in both traditional and modern societies. However, Durack's argument also rests on a strong distinction between the two types of society—between the modern Enlightenment practices of legal wrangling and copyright and the natural practices of myth. In fact, the culture myths of Indigenous peoples in both North America and Australia are themselves the subject of a great deal of legal wrangling, precisely because the rights of the stories' owners have not been respected, and sacred stories have been appropriated, circulated, and sold for profit by settlers (note 3). Myth is thus being used here to elide or obscure the particular contemporary social, cultural, and legal dynamics of fan fiction rather than to illuminate them.

[2.12] Durack's argument works rhetorically by associating myth both with nature and with a dehistoricized and romanticized picture of traditional societies (the Greeks or Native Americans) and then opposing this natural authentic folk culture to corporate legal wrangling and to modern capitalist models of private ownership. This in itself, as Bruce Lincoln points out, is an inherently mythic move: "The misrepresentation of culture as nature is an ideological move characteristic of myth, as is the projection of the narrator's ideals, desires, and favored ranking of categories into a fictive prehistory that purportedly establishes how things are and must be" (1999, 149). Durack, Jenkins, and Montano are all doing exactly this when they appeal to a "fictive prehistory" (belonging indifferently to the Greeks, the Native Americans, and 19th-century US settler culture) which establishes our contemporary right to "perpetuate myth" (Montano 2013, 695). The specific myth about myth that Durack retells in abbreviated form here, and that Jenkins's and Montano's arguments also rely on, can be traced back ultimately to the work of Johann Gottfried Herder in the 18th century.

[2.13] In his account of the history of myth scholarship in *Theorizing Myth*, Bruce Lincoln shows how Herder's theory of myth transforms the

mythos/logos binary set up by Plato. Plato (himself inverting an earlier set of associations found in Hesiod and Homer) associates logos with masculine, authoritative, truthful, and rational speech, and mythos with feminine, manipulative, misleading, and irrational speech: Herder inverts Plato's value system and valorizes myth as an authentic, organic, and primordial form of knowing. Myths, for Herder, belong to and define a *Volk*: shared mythology that creates and defines a community, a culture, a race, and a homeland or nation. In Herder's response to the Gaelic epic poetry of Ossian, collected/ discovered/ forged by James Macpherson from 1760 onwards, "mythic poetry, which the Enlightenment disparaged as a form of primitive irrationality, [was] retheorized under the signs of authenticity, tradition, and national identity" (Lincoln 1999, 51).

[2.14] Understandings of fan practice as folk culture are thus rooted in a Herderian model of myth as the unifying factor that produces and defines an authentic national community or culture: as, that is, a counterhegemonic popular discourse. The chapter of Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* that cites both Durack and Magee opens with the claim: "*Star Wars* has become their 'legend,' and now they are determined to remake it on their own terms" (2006, 135).

[2.15] Fannish claims to ownership of popular texts on the basis of a myth about myth as folklore thus seem to justify some of the criticisms made by classical scholars about the poverty of a decontextualized understanding of myth that elides cultural and historical differences in storytelling practices as well as flattening out power differentials. However, as I turn away from fannish theories of myth to fan fictional practices in my next two sections, I hope to show that the practice of fan fiction is richer and more interesting than its theory. In particular, fan fiction is far ahead in its capacity to articulate arguments about story, hegemony, and power.

3. The myth of myth as counterhegemonic discourse

[3.1] The understanding of fan fiction as myth as folk culture sketched above highlights a central debate in myth and pop culture studies. Is myth to be understood, as Jenkins argues (via Magee and Durack), as a counterhegemonic popular discourse, a common culture which can potentially resist or subvert an ideologically driven mass culture? Such a model of myth can be found in many places both in myth scholarship and in pop culture studies, but it is in direct opposition to another model that constructs myth as fundamentally and essentially hegemonic: thus Barthes defines myth as a form of "depoliticized speech" (1972, 142), belonging to the Right rather than to the Left (148), which "transforms history into Nature" (128); Lincoln, similarly, calls myth "ideology in narrative form" (Lincoln 1999, 147).

[3.2] The claims made about myth and cultural ownership discussed above, in their appeal to the natural rights of the folk to the ownership of myth, are not very useful in developing a sufficiently complex understanding of the relationship between story, culture, society, and power. This is because they ultimately, if unwittingly, draw on Herder's primitivizing theory of myth. In *Theorizing Myth*, Bruce Lincoln analyzes the ways in which Herder's model has implicitly continued to shape both academic and popular understandings of myth throughout the 20th century. He argues that instead, we should attend in more detail to the way in which agency operates in the "act of narration" of myths and use "a more dialectic, eminently political theory of narration, one that recognizes the capacity of narrators to modify details of the stories that pass through them, introducing changes in the classificatory order as they do so, most often in ways that reflect their subject position and advance their interests" (1999, 149).

[3.3] Lincoln's call for a theory of narration that "recognizes the capacity of

narrators to modify details of...stories...in ways that reflect their subject position and advance their interests" precisely echoes the way in which fan fiction studies has understood transformative fan work ever since the pioneering work of Constance Penley and Henry Jenkins. Jenkins's and (especially) Penley's analysis draws on a theory of myth as female-voiced and counterhegemonic discourse, linking fan practices to the mythopoetic practices and theory developed in second-wave feminism in two interrelated contexts.

[3.4] Mythopoesis appeared in second-wave feminism firstly via the return to the theory of originary matriarchy. This theory was developed in the mid-19th century by the Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen, was fleshed out at the turn of the 20th century by the pioneering feminist classicist and myth scholar Jane Ellen Harrison, and served as a potent source of inspiration to second-wave matriarchalists like Mary Daly: according to this theory, the earliest human societies were matriarchal. Patriarchy arrived later and violently, seeking to erase all traces of originary matriarchy; this historical event is registered in Greek myth through stories about the rise to dominance of the Olympian pantheon—particularly Zeus, who became King and Father of Gods by destroying his mother.

[3.5] Secondly, myth emerged in second-wave feminist discourse in the theory of women's writing as revisionist mythmaking associated with poets like Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, and alfa, and developed theoretically by second-wave poet-critics including Adrienne Rich (again), Hélène Cixous, and Alicia Ostriker. This theory sought to resolve debates about the nature of women's writing by arguing that differences between men's and women's writing arise not from essential differences between men and women but from the ways in which men and women are positioned differently with respect to culture and language.

[3.6] Tina Passman brings both strands of feminist mythmaking together in an essay in a very early collection of feminist classical scholarship, writing:

[3.7] In this particular cultural moment when many of us cry for a revolution in human thought and action, some feminisms have anchored their visionary work firmly to the past, linking the notions 'ancient' and 'future'...The unearthing of evidence for early matriculture in the West—Europe, Asia Minor, and Africa—furnishes the seed for this feminist re-visioning and re-construction of a matrilineal past and carries with it a web of ethics, aesthetics, history, and spirituality. (1993, 182)

[3.8] Passman's careful positioning of this matrilineal past as something that can only be accessed through feminist re-visioning and reconstruction—not through the disciplinary norms of history—echoes the attitude of most second-wave feminists, including Adrienne Rich. They are simultaneously doubtful about the reliability of historical accounts of ancient matriarchies, on the one hand, and, on the other, suspicious of the intensity with which such societies are declared impossible by mainstream scholars. Both Passman and Rich, tellingly, turn to the term *myth* to resolve (or dissolve?) this contradiction between history and ideology: Passman writes of a "feminist myth of a matricultural origin for the West" that "proposes a view of cultural history that challenges the basic values and assumptions of Western patriarchy" (1993, 182).

[3.9] This powerful feminist myth of myth—the idea of a feminine origin for culture and history, erased by a late-coming patriarchy—is given equally powerful form in Lisztful's 2009 fan fic *The First Place* (2009). In the fic, the goddess Hera travels through a contemporary world, gathering several of her children and stepchildren—Dionysus, Apollo, Ares, Hephaestus, Artemis, Heracles, and Aphrodite—for a birthday party. At the party, she announces to her children: "I fear I'd been made to believe that your father came first.

That he made all of us, all of this. In that, I was incorrect...I am the first...I am the beginning. Life springs from me, and always shall." When Zeus arrives, she says to him:

[3.10] Hera is not my only name. I have been many names. Ma Gu, Gaia, Ninhursag, Hathor, Isis, Spider Grandmother. I am Tiamat, Inanna, Ninsun, Asherah, Ashtart, Cybele, Danu. I am Frekka, Holda, Frau Holle, Potria Theron, Erda, and Umai, Mahimata, Shakti. I am all of these and more. I am the beginning, the first, the place from which all the rest is born. I am the mother of it all, and I love all of it...From this point forward...I intend to be all of these names, and all of these ideas. All of it. It is I, and you shall no longer wear it as your own. I know you can't, for in the naming, I've found all of the power I didn't before know was mine.

[3.11] This moment draws on a number of important second-wave feminist re-visionings of myth and history. Firstly, the myth of an originary matriarchy, lost and erased with the advent of Zeus but still at least in principle retrievable. Hera's account of the loss of her originary status—"I was made to believe that your father came first...In that, I was incorrect"—closely echoes Harrison's account of the patriarchal-Olympian revisionist account of the birth of Pandora, who, Harrison argues, was an important goddess prior to the advent of Olympian religion:

[3.12] Zeus the Father will have no great Earth-goddess, Mother and Maid in one, in his man-fashioned Olympus, but her figure is from the beginning, so he remakes it; woman...who made all things, gods and mortals alike, is become their plaything, their slave...To Zeus, the archpatriarchal bourgeois, the birth of the first woman is but a huge Olympian jest. (quoted in Passman 1993, 193)

[3.13] Secondly, Lisztful's title, *The First Place*, invokes a tradition of second-wave (and later) feminist appropriations of the concept of *chora*. Plato introduces *chora* in the dialogue *Timaeus*, where he associates it with the terms *womb* and *nurse* and says that it "provides a position for everything that comes to be." *Chora*, which is closely associated with motherhood, is the originary space in which spatiality, signification, and life become possible—it is, literally, the first place. As has been traced, for example, by Alex Wardrop (2013), *chora* was taken up by a series of feminist philosophers, beginning with Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Kristeva theorizes an originary maternity, which Lisztful's story superimposes on Bachofen's/Harrison's myth of originary matriarchy: Hera speaks from and as *chora* when she says "I am the beginning, the first, the place from which all the rest is born."

[3.14] Finally, Hera's words "in the naming, I've found all of the power I didn't before know was mine" allude, appropriately enough, to Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, the founding text of matriarchalist feminism, which sets out from the premise that "Women have had the power of *naming* stolen from us" and attempts to take that power back (Daly 1978, 8).

[3.15] Lisztful's story thus also thematizes the stealing or reclaiming of language that Alicia Ostriker identifies as the fundamental characteristic of feminist mythmaking in her essay "The Thieves of Language," writing:

[3.16] Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted or defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. Historic and quasi-historic figures like Napoleon and Sappho are in

this sense mythic, as are folktales, legends, and Scripture. (1985, 317)

[3.17] Lisztful's story, I would argue, is genuinely mythic according to almost any of the criteria or models referred to in this paper. However, this is not because it includes subject matter, characters, or narrative structures drawn from classical mythology, but because it is embedded in a web of culturally meaningful and ideologically contested stories. That is, its mythic characters are not so much Hera, Zeus, and Aphrodite as they are Jane Harrison, Mary Daly, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous: it is from these characters and their stories that *The First Place* gains its narrative and social power. It is mythic not because of its content but because of its narrative form and its effectiveness as a social practice—two factors that, as we will see in the final section, are interrelated.

4. The myth of myth as a universal story world

[4.1] Lisztful's use of feminist myths of myth is an example of fan fiction's capacity to elaborate a more sophisticated version of syncretism than does Vogler's reading of Campbell or Jenkins/Montano/Durack's version of Herder. *The First Place* practices a mode of fannish mythmaking which does not simply assert an equivalence between all storytelling, all people, and all cultures, or between Greek myth, Native American myth, and *Star Wars*. Instead, it draws on both equivalence and difference to bring two mythic systems together and use them to interrogate one another.

[4.2] In this final section of the paper, I want to examine some other ways in which fan fiction can do this, looking at a very few particularly interesting examples from the Greek and Roman Mythology fandom on AO3.

[4.3] Of the 1,520 fics on AO3, between 40 and 50 percent remain entirely within the Greek mythic-historical story world: these include fics set within the Homeric universe, most often the *Iliad* rather than the *Odyssey*, as well as fics about the Olympian gods, ranging from the well known (Persephone/Hades is a particularly popular pairing) to the obscure (Helenus/Neoptolemus, in orphan_account's *Rarely Pure and Never Simple* [2010]). The most common kind of story here is a retelling of a myth in a style that fleshes out the characterization of the classical gods and heroes according to contemporary fictional and psychological norms, as encapsulated in the author's note in onehoureternity's *Darling, if you please (Don't go without me)* (2012): "The history is mostly canon-compliant, I just filled in Thetis' thoughts and emotions." The use of modernizing psychology sometimes shades into the use of a contemporary-colloquial style and setting, as in chellerrific's *Tea Time* (2011) (where Hestia drinks tea and reads *Harry Potter*), saturninepen's *Happiness* (2012) (where a teenage Hades is bullied by a jock Zeus and comforted with the gift of puppy Cerberus), or skipirateb's *No Girls Allowed* (2012) (in which little Zeus, Poseidon, and Demeter won't let little Hades into their tree house). This category in turn shades into one of the other most popular types of story: the retelling of a myth in a contemporary setting.

[4.4] There are two main kinds of modernizing retellings on AO3: first, stories about the ancient gods and heroes having survived into the contemporary world (more on these below), and second, crossover fics. In some crossovers, characters from contemporary popular-culture texts encounter classical gods and heroes, as in Wynkat's *I See You* (2012), where Adam Lambert has sex with Dionysus; liliaeth's *The Pet Whisperer* (2012), where Despoine, the daughter of Demeter and Poseidon, trains Dean Winchester as a pet for Castiel; and Winter of our Discontent's *The Mind Has Mazes* (2012), in which Bruce Banner and Tony Stark find themselves in Minos's Labyrinth. Other fics marked as crossovers retell myths with contemporary pop culture characters in the starring roles, and they do so to

a number of different effects. Meretricula's *Ibra in the Underworld* (2011) is a soccer RPF fic which sees the Swedish footballer Zlatan Ibrahimovic enter "the underworld where players go where they retire" to bring back Alessandro Nesta, who is not playing because of a dislocated shoulder:

[4.5] At the entrance of the underworld is a mighty three-headed creature...Zlatan approached the beast and said,

[4.6] "I am Zlatan, and I am a god to the people of Sweden, and I have come to the underworld to find Alessandro Nesta and bring him back with me. Let me pass."

[4.7] The creature shook its middle head, which said, "Zlatan Ibrahimovic, we guard the country of retired souls. None who yet plays may enter here. Return when you are too old and crippled to hobble off the bench, even in Italy, even for Milan, and then we shall let you pass."

[4.8] "I am Zlatan," said Zlatan, "and you will let me pass now." And then he kicked the creature in each of its three heads.

[4.9] The creature did not fall down dead or even unconscious as Zlatan had expected, since he had a great deal of experience in kicking people in the head. However, it is a little known fact that to the three-headed beast that guards the underworld, a kick in the head is truest gesture of friendship that exists. It did not fall, but all three heads began to weep tears of a shared love of manly violence, and it did embrace Zlatan with all six of its arms.

[4.10] The phrase "I am Zlatan, and I am a god to the people of Sweden" references a fan vid (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9m7m8_2t4Y), and this passage also refers to Ibrahimovic's well-documented habit of kicking his teammates. Meretricula uses the mythic framework to present information and references in comically decontextualized ways (for example, the unexpected dissing of Milan's soccer team by the guardian of the Underworld) and also to produce humor through her use of irony and her pitch-perfect control of register. A large part of the point is the lack of fit between the mythic tale and the characters and events narrated, underscored in the moment where Orpheus-Zlatan looks back at Eurydice-Nesta:

[4.11] And as was thus inevitable, having passed again through the gates and across the river and up to the entrance where his three-headed friend awaited, as he passed the threshold into the world above, Zlatan glanced back to make certain that Nesta was behind him and broke his compact with the Dread Lord and his Queen.

[4.12] "You stupid fucking fuck!" said Nesta. "Why the fuck did you do that? Now I have to go back and be retired forever! Fuck you!"

[4.13] "Fuck me?" said Zlatan. "Fuck you, you fucking pussy! What, do you want to be retired forever?...Why don't you fight to stay, you stupid useless piece of shit!"

[4.14] ..."For the love of Paolo Maldini," said Dread Lord Guardiola. "Just take him and go, so long as you never come back."

[4.15] Meretricula acknowledges the inevitability of the (usually poignant) moment for which this myth is best known—the moment at which Orpheus looks back and loses Eurydice—but also resists that inevitability and gives the story a happy ending by allowing the characters to talk back to the myth

in irreverent terms. Finally, then, this story does address two of the key interpretative problems that the Orpheus-Eurydice story continues to pose: Why did Orpheus look back, and why does Eurydice have no agency? Through sheer force of will and size of personality, Meretricula's Zlatan and Nesta are able to override the cruel inevitability of the mythic narrative.

[4.16] Silverpard's *Lament* (2011), a *Sherlock* (2010–) fic, makes very different use of the same myth, casting Sherlock Holmes as Orpheus and John Watson as Eurydice. The fic opens with a programmatic passage showcasing its syncretic use of myth:

[4.17] Say it: John is dead...

[4.18] Not possible. *Not possible*.

[4.19] (Whatever remains, however improbable)

[4.20] Then. Since it is not possible that John is dead (though he is, perhaps you should amend that—it is not possible that John can *remain* dead, permanently parted from you) what can you do to correct this state of affairs?

[4.21] Here Sherlock's famous dictum "once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" is economically used to create a shared story world where this hyperrational character can plausibly enter the mythic realm of the Underworld. Sherlock finds it impossible to accept the reality of John's death and so, by his own logic (which, as the BBC series showed, is consistently undermined by his inability to deal with emotions), an alternative reality must be found. In the Underworld, we are told that "yours [Sherlock's] is not a mind made to know the path between the worlds of life and death" (a line used as the summary of the story), and that "even as you walk, it twists before your eyes, your logical mind rebelling, interpreting it all as something you can understand." We are therefore prepared for the denouement of the story, in which Sherlock is sabotaged by both his rationality and his emotions:

[4.22] You can hear your heart beating, blood rushing in your ears, the sound of your feet against earth, against stone, the echo of Hades' laughter.

[4.23] You cannot hear John.

[4.24] The path is steep, and John's leg still trouble(d)s him now and then; he would not be able to keep from making small noises of discomfort, not at the unrelenting pace you are setting...

[4.25] The silence has never been so terrible since the morning you woke and didn't have to realise John was not there, woke and didn't have to remind yourself he was gone...

[4.26] You are alone, and the sunlight is cold and weak on your face—you *are alone* and you cannot bear it, must *know* and so you

turn

and

look.

[4.27] Silverpard's story elegantly fuses the world of *Sherlock* with the world of Greek myth, both emotionally and narratively. It uses the well-known myth to explore Sherlock's characterization, and it uses our familiarity with Sherlock's emotional life to flesh out the myth and make it legible within the conventions of contemporary realist fiction.

[4.28] Crossover fics explicitly juxtapose different story worlds, but

modernizing retellings of myth can be used in a similar way, to probe similarities and differences between narrative and characterological conventions rather than simply insisting on equivalences. They can even be used, as in Daygloparker's *songs inside the fog inside the world* (2009), to reflect on myth itself and, ultimately, to put forward an alternative myth of myth, one attentive to variant traditions and to the political aspects of narration, along the lines proposed by Bruce Lincoln.

[4.29] *Songs inside the fog inside the world*, a 1,500-word story written for Yuletide 2009, is a short, fragmented narrative telling the story of a journalist writing a profile of the chain-smoking, texting heroine/constellation Andromeda. Andromeda is consistently figured as a celebrity, and the story's dizzying power comes in great part from the ways in which it both conflates and distinguishes between Greek myth and contemporary celebrity culture.

[4.30] "You know," Andromeda says, "when you spend time as a constellation, you get to read a lot. I know, right? Stars, reading." "Stars, reading" is an impossible phenomenon and also a pun. The phrase refers simultaneously to Andromeda's form as a constellation and to a contemporary stereotype of the unintelligent celebrity (the story opens with Andromeda quoting Tolstoy and asking "You think...I'm too dim to actually read?" in an allusion to a well-known anecdote about Marilyn Monroe reading Dostoevsky). Throughout the story, Andromeda is consistently shown performing physical actions surely only possible in a human body (smoking, texting, drying dishes), but we are just as consistently told that she is a constellation. Thus, in an oblique reference to her mythic past when she was chained to a rock as a sacrifice to a sea monster and rescued by Perseus, we are told that "she still has the scars on her wrists," but moments later the journalist says "at least as a constellation you can't be chained to a rock any more, right?"

[4.31] We are thus never quite able to settle into either a realist or a mythic reading practice of the story or to visualize Andromeda consistently. The story denies us a stable version of Andromeda, insisting even in its physical detail on the incommensurability of the multiple versions of her story.

[4.32] Daygloparker's story draws an equivalence between mythical characters and celebrities—both are stars—but uses this for an oblique interrogation of the whole notion of variant traditions and versions and of the equivalences drawn between myth and popular culture. The story repeatedly refers to the dominance of Ovid's (or "that Latin bastard," as Andromeda calls him) version of the story and casts Andromeda as an aberrant or resistant reader of her own and other stories. Like many fans, Andromeda has a tendency to identify with villains and to question the political and ideological motives behind casting certain characters as good or evil: "The first time I read *Cinderella*—I don't know, am I broken? Scared? Demented? I felt bad for the stepsisters." In telling her own story to the Interviewer, she centers the narrative on Medusa, the woman whose death made her rescue possible ("She *died*, and my husband gave her head to a fucking important goddess on a fucking important plate, and I'm supposed to feel great about that—and I *do*, really, but—she died.")

[4.33] Near the end of the story is the following brief unfocalized passage:

[4.34] Once upon a time, a guy saved a girl, and then they got married.

[4.35] (Once upon a time, a father feared his son, and locked him and his mother in a chest. The son lived, and eventually killed a Gorgon—an evil creature, we have all decided—and then that saved a girl, so then they got married.)

[4.36] The timeline is a little fuzzy on the actual sequence of events.

[4.37] To most people, it doesn't matter.

[4.38] This passage implicitly juxtaposes the Campbellian version of myth—the one where the "actual sequence of events...doesn't matter" because the core of the myth is invariant across all its variant retellings—to a version which is attentive to the politics of narration and to the importance of differences across retellings. To Andromeda, the sequence of events, the precise ways in which she is related to the other characters in the story—Perseus, Cetus, Medusa—does matter. The story thus insists both on Andromeda's translatability and transmissibility across historical and cultural contexts and, simultaneously, on her embedment in a complex, specific, and noninterchangeable web of human (and divine, and monstrous) relationships.

[4.39] In other words, *songs inside the fog inside the world* does draw implicitly on the idea of equivalence between story worlds, as in its pun on "stars, reading," which fuses the figure of the stellified Greek heroine with that of the movie star. But instead of using this equivalence, like Vogler, to collapse all story worlds into the same world and all versions of (even one) myth into the same story, daygloparker uses it to generate a story that is embedded narratively in its original mythic story world and socially in our contemporary context. As with Lizstful's story, daygloparker's is mythic not because it is about Andromeda, in whom we do not believe, but because it is about characters and entities who are important in our contemporary context: Marilyn Monroe, Ovid—and storytelling itself.

[4.40] Although daygloparker's story, like the others I have read here, demonstrates and embodies the potential interconnectedness of all stories, it does not do so by claiming that all stories are the same, as in Vogler's version of Campbell: quite the opposite, in fact. Rather than defining the mythic dimension of story as a story's invariant structure, infinitely transferrable/translatable into new periods and contexts but never itself changing, daygloparker defines myth by its infinite variation and by the way in which it can weave characters and stories and ideas together into a single story world. The way in which she uses myth is strikingly resonant with Sarah Iles Johnston's recent work on Greek myth, which sees "an essential element" of the social power of myth as being "the tightly woven story world that was cumulatively being created on a continuous basis by the myths that were narrated. The closely intertwined nature of this story world validated not only each individual myth that comprised it but all the stories about what had happened in the mythic past, the characters who inhabited them, and the entire worldview upon which they rested" (2015, 284).

[4.41] For Johnston, the Greek mythic story world is characterized by crossover and hyperseriality—a term that she uses for Greek myth as well as "soap operas" and "other extended narratives" (she cites a variety of 20th- and 21st-century fiction in comparison, including *The Forsyte Chronicles* [sic] and Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series) (2015, 298). She highlights "the dense *intertwining* of characters and their stories in these sorts of narratives and the difficulty of completely disengaging any one of them from the much larger network of which they are a part," arguing that "such intertwining lends credibility to the stories in which these characters participate simply because they all are understood to inhabit the same expanding and yet bounded story world; each guarantees and is guaranteed by the others" (2015, 300). In an exemplary reading drawing on the rituals of the cult of Persephone and Demeter, the myths of Theseus, *Torchwood* (2006–11), and *The Magician's Nephew* (1955), Johnston shows that a "thickly crisscrossing network" of interwoven characters and stories implies a universe where "everything can be made to fit together; everything can be understood as

part of a single, bigger picture and thus ratified, if only you know where to look for the missing pieces—or how to fashion them yourself" (2015, 306).

[4.42] Johnston argues that despite their similarities of form, there is a significant difference between classical myth and contemporary pop culture hyperserials in that we are not encouraged to believe in the secondary worlds that these hyperserials construct as a part of our own social worlds. But, as I have argued above (and elsewhere), fan-fictional hyperseriality is motivated by a desire to intervene not only in the narrative worlds of its source materials but also in the social world of its telling. The hyperserial narrative form of fan fiction is part of the way in which fan fiction is able to create persuasive mythic narratives—not about Andromeda or Sherlock Holmes but about storytelling itself. When fan fiction is most theoretically engaged, it is also most mythically potent.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] The distinction between scholarly and popular models of myth with which I started has, I hope, been dissolved in the course of this paper: some popular models of myth can be traced back to scholarly sources (Herder, Campbell), but, simultaneously, the mythmaking practice of amateurs—fans and other writers, including second-wave feminist writers—converges with critical scholarly work on hyperseriality, producing fictocritical discourse on the crisscrossing story worlds of myth that itself crosses the border between academic and fannish work.

[5.2] Lincoln argues that as myths get appropriated and renarrated in the service of different interests, they can potentially "recalibrate categories and redistribute privilege" (1999, 261). In the reinvigorated discourse on myth today, I see opportunities for fans, pop culture scholars, and classicists to work together in order to recalibrate categories and redistribute privilege, including the categories and privileges that are used to divide the makers and readers of myth into scholarly and amateur communities, with little or no genuine dialogue going on between us.

6. Notes

1. Thus in 1988, in *Classics*, Claude Calame published *Métamorphoses du mythe en Grèce antique*, while in popular culture, PBS screened *The Power of Myth*, a documentary on the work of Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), filmed at George Lucas's ranch and seeded with references to *Star Wars*.

2. I use the term *amateur* not in a pejorative sense but rather in the sense of an affective knowledge community existing in an ambivalent relation to public institutions of knowledge such as the university.

3. See, for example, Terri Janke's *Our Culture: Our Future: Report on Australian Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights*, published in 1999, and Alexandria Wilson's article "How Our Stories Are Told" published in 1998 in *Canadian Journal of Native Education*.

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